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# (Trans)cribing History: The Oral Histories of Transgender Clergy in America

Jae Bates

*University of Puget Sound*, [jsoheebates@pugetsound.edu](mailto:jsoheebates@pugetsound.edu)

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# (Trans)cribing History:

## The Oral Histories of Transgender Clergy in America

Jae Bates

Chism Research Scholar 2016

## Introduction

Just a year after the Supreme Court of the United States' historic ruling on same-sex marriage, conservative lawmakers in 22 states returned with renewed vitality and over one hundred pieces of anti-LGBTQ legislation. Some of these new anti-LGBTQ bills directly targeted transgender and non-binary individuals' right to use public restrooms. Many proponents of these anti-trans bills used their traditional Christian faith as their rationale. This type of religious backing has been consistent throughout anti-LGBT politics. The association between religious devotion and conservative politics has become prevalent in the American imagination. In addition to this stereotype of Christians, transgender identities have only become particularly visible in the last couple of years. Ultimately, this becomes problematic because it causes the stories of those who are both LGBTQ and Christian to go unheard. However, the relationship between gender identity and faith is an important one. I conducted nine qualitative interviews with transgender Christian leaders and was able to find four themes across the participants' stories. I found that participants shared a sense that living out their gender identity was integral to living out their faith, that time and generation played a role in ideas about gender and ordination and most participants had a Christian upbringing. Furthermore, participants faced more barriers to jobs than to ordination itself.

I came to my research question while exploring paper topics for my "Religions of the Book" class. I wanted to write about transgender religious leaders but was unable to locate any primary sources and could only find a few secondary sources. The very few sources I found were articles or essays by cisgender theologians trying to reconcile transgender identities with

particular biblical passages. I decided to collect the oral histories of transgender and non-binary clergy. This research explores the intersecting identities of gender and religion through the oral histories of Christian transgender clergy.

## Methods

To give further context to my research, it is important to understand the definitions of the identities I was using in order to find participants. During this project, being transgender was defined as identifying as any other gender other than the one that one was assigned at birth. This definition of transgender opened up the project so that any non-cisgender person would qualify for the project. It is also a more open and inclusive way of defining transgender. I wanted to ensure that there was gender diversity amongst my participants. Secondly, I used a very broad definition of the word ‘clergy.’ I did this because I recognized the institutional barriers and personal barriers for marginalized populations to positions of power. ‘Clergy’ includes anyone who was ordained through a regular ordination process, anyone who was alternatively ordained, anyone who is a candidate for ordination, as well as anyone who is an exemplary member of their church who has taken high ranking and public roles in church or denominational affairs or activism.

During my research, I conducted qualitative interviews with Christian clergy members who openly identify as transgender. In other words, the clergy members are open about their gender identities in their life and work. I found participants through public articles or networks of transgender clergy and Christian leaders. These precautions prevented social danger to the participants or any risk to their employment. During these interviews, I asked clergy members to

narrate their life histories. I chose to study transgender clergy due to their in-depth and unique look at the acceptance of transgender people into churches in the U.S.

I was able to get into contact with nine openly transgender clergy. The pool of participants was geographically diverse and fairly racially diverse. My questions were focused on understanding the evolution of their personal faith and how it has affected their involvement in Christian leadership. I also inquired about their involvement in particular denominations, organizations, and advocacy efforts. I will begin each interview with basic questions about a participant's upbringing. I asked if they were raised in the Christian faith, what denomination, where they grew up, what their experience growing up as Christian (or not) was like. As we moved through their life, I asked about their coming into a transgender identity. I asked questions that covered the intersections of faith and gender. For example: "what kinds of messages about Christianity were important to you as you transitioned and/or came out as trans?" I also asked them about their involvement in LGBT or Christian work and activism.

Before conducting interviews I reviewed two pieces of literature that I found helpful as well as the denominational websites of all major protestant denominations. Some of the key pieces of scholarship regarding my research question are Rev. Justin Tanis' *Transgendered Theology, Ministry, and Communities of Faith* and Susan Stryker's *Transgender History*. Justin Tanis begins his monograph by situating himself within the topic of transgender<sup>1</sup> theology and faith. He does this by telling about his childhood, his conception of gender, his ordination, and his gender transition. Tanis situates himself as a transgender clergy person writing about transgender theology and faith. He also states that he is ordained in the Metropolitan Community

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<sup>1</sup> Tanis uses the word "transgendered" but I will use the term transgender as the use of the word and community preferred terminology has changed

Church which gives an important understanding to his experience with transgender people and his theological lens on gender identity. After situating himself within the topic, Tanis explains why he is writing this piece and what its goals are. Tanis explains that his goal is to “delve into the spiritual nature of transgender people” and to “hear the stories of others” like him (5). It seems that the “spiritual nature” of transgender people that he wants to explore is mostly related to how faith plays a role in the journeys and transformations of transgender people. Furthermore, Tanis positions his target audience as cisgender readers. This is evident in the way that he positions himself, a transgender man, against “you” in the introduction. In the introduction, Tanis states that he wants to “bring [transgender] voices forward for you to hear, to understand, and perhaps to broaden the way you see gender” (18). He addresses the reader and assumes that the reader is in need of understanding transgender identities and how they exist within spirituality and faith. Based on the introduction, Tanis is more concerned with opening the minds of cisgender people of faith, specifically Christians, to transgender people. Tanis also states that his focus is on Western Christian ideas about gender. Both of these statements are helpful in understanding the intent and lens behind the writing.

Tanis then goes into introducing the stories of various transgender individuals. He includes reflections by Kate Bornstein and Ivan E. Coyote. Both Kate and Ivan reflect on childhood moments related to gender; neither story has any relation to faith or spirituality. Tanis goes on to explain how transgender people are perceived in society and what issues they face. Then he compares these issues to Biblical stories and passages. This indicates that Tanis is relating the general transgender experience to spirituality and faith. Tanis also includes reflections from Christian transgender people to shift the conversation towards religion and faith.

My research differs from Tanis' because my research aims to address the self-conception of the intersection of gender identity and Christianity to gain a better understanding of the self-conception of transgender Christian clergy and how they have worked to form and change the Christian communities they are a part of. My research does not aim to just create a better understanding of transgender people for the reader. The research that I will be doing is to preserve the history of transgender faith leaders for all people rather than to attempt to argue or explain that transgender people are able to fit into Christian teaching.

*Transgender History* by Susan Stryker is also a key piece of literature when discussing the history of transgender people in the United States. Susan Stryker has played a key role in the creation of Transgender Studies and is a well-known transgender scholar. Stryker positions herself as both a personal and academic expert on transgender issues in the prologue of this book. Stryker discloses that she identifies as a lesbian transsexual woman and explains that she has been able to use her formal education to document transgender history. Stryker chronicles transgender history from the mid-twentieth century through the turn of the century. Additionally, Stryker includes a lot of history regarding the feminist movement and its various relationships to transgender and gender rights. The purpose of the book is to document history that is specific to transgender people, communities, and the movement. The book does not necessarily have a thesis or argument and serves more as an overview. This structure of the book indicates that Stryker wants all different types of readers to consume this book in order to continue the historical knowledge of transgender history. Transgender history is under-documented and is usually not common knowledge, even amongst transgender people. This book differs from Tanis because Stryker is not intending to necessarily change anyone's heart or mind through the book.

My research will differ from Stryker's in its focus. To reiterate, Stryker's *Transgender History* is a very wide overview of transgender history. She covers issues from the very beginning of transsexual communities to HIV/AIDS to popular transgender visibility in the twenty-first century. Stryker's research is also largely about "secular" history or non-religious history. In the chapter *Transgender Liberation*, Stryker briefly discusses the role of clergy and the United Methodist Church in the Tenderloin in the 1960's. However, Stryker still recounts the church's involvement as part of social activism or liberalism, rather than from a viewpoint that discusses and embraces the role of religion and faith at the time.

In addition to this literature, I reviewed the denominational websites for the United Church of Christ (UCC), the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A), the Episcopal Church, the Metropolitan Community Church (MCC), and the United Methodist Church (UMC). I analyzed each website based on 1.) how easy information about LGBT people could be accessed 2.) how this information was displayed 3.) the language in each church's statement as well as 4.) what the church's actual stance on LGBTQ issues is. I also analyzed each website to see if they mention LGBTQ people beyond just their statements on sexuality and gender.

For example, I was taking note of if they had specific groups or ministries for LGBTQ people, if there was mention of LGBTQ people or leaders on the homepage, or if there were any other resources that the denomination offered about gender or sexuality aside from their denominational statement or policy. Lastly, I took notice of if a denomination distinguished between sexuality and gender identity as two distinct issues. I found that every denomination, except the United Methodist Church, allows LGBT people to go through the ordination process.



However, the UMC is currently in debate over the issue of LGBT ordination and some regions have decided to go ahead with LGBT ordination. However, most of the denominational policies did not enumerate the identities and distinguish gender from sexuality. Many of the policies are either interpreted to include transgender people or just use the acronym LGBT. I found that the ELCA and Presbyterian (U.S.A) denominations allow the ordination of LGBT people but do not require it or ban discriminatory practices by individual churches<sup>2</sup>.

On the other hand, the Episcopal Church and the MCC both take more radically inclusive approaches towards transgender ordination by banning discrimination of LGBT.<sup>3</sup> In 2003, the UCC passed a resolution affirming transgender people's right to be ordained.<sup>4</sup> All of the churches except the UMC offer options for transgender clergy to go through their regular ordination process.<sup>5</sup> Additionally, the practice of inclusion and acceptance vary greatly across the U.S. based on a multitude of factors. I found that the Episcopal Church, the UCC, and the MCC all had LGBT or specifically transgender ministry pages linked to their denominational site.<sup>6</sup> It was crucial to analyze the denominational websites to get a general idea of what it is like to be LGBT in these specific denominations. Analyzing each church's baseline was important so that the stories of each participant would make more sense in context. I also needed to research each denomination because I did not have a full understanding of every church.

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<sup>2</sup> @ELCA. "Human Sexuality." *ELCA.org*. N.p., 2009. Web. 10 Sept. 2016.

<sup>3</sup> 76th General Convention of the Episcopal Church. "Resolutions D012, D090, D032, and C048." 2009.

<sup>4</sup> Twenty-fourth General Synod of the United Church of Christ. "AFFIRMING THE PARTICIPATION AND MINISTRY OF TRANSGENDER PEOPLE WITHIN THE UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST AND SUPPORTING THEIR CIVIL AND HUMAN RIGHTS" 15 July 2003. Web. 10 Sept. 2016

<sup>5</sup> The United Methodist Church General Conference. "Regarding the ministry of the ordained." ¶ 304.3. 2012. Web. 10 Sept. 2016

<sup>6</sup> Partridge, Cameron, and Kori Pacyniak. "TransEpiscopal." *TransEpiscopal*. N.p., 2016. Web. 10 Sept. 2016.

## I. Gender Identity as Spiritual Practice

The first theme I noticed was that many of the participants viewed the expression of their gender identity as an inherently religious or spiritual experience. Lawrence Richardson said that he feels that he cannot separate any of his identities and that they all play an integral role in his work and life. Richardson stated that he finds unity between his identities “in God, expressed through Jesus specifically.”<sup>7</sup> He also affirmed that unity can be found through other faiths as well. In other words, Richardson cannot separate his Christian faith from his gender or race. Jesus Christ brings him unity in life and therefore he feels a spiritual connection to his identity as a whole. Nicole Garcia added that “by recognizing that I am a transgender woman, I am recognizing God’s gift to me.”<sup>8</sup> Additionally, Justin Tanis stated that he sees gender as “being a calling” and that his gender identity “relates to [his] spirituality” and that “God has called [him] to have a way of seeing and a way of being in the world.”<sup>9</sup> Both Garcia and Tanis view their gender identity as a gift or calling from God.

This connection between an authentic gender identity and an authentic faith seem to be an important tie for participants. They indicated to me that they do not feel that they are truly expressing their faith in Christ if they are not also expressing their full and true gender. This theme counteracts many of the assumptions about transgender identities and the Christian faith. Many conversations about LGBTQ identities in the church often revolve around reconciliation. In other words, churches often discuss how to make being LGBTQ compatible with Christianity,

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<sup>7</sup> Richardson, Lawrence. "Oral History with Lawrence Richardson." Telephone interview. 14 July 2016.

<sup>8</sup> Garcia, Nicole. "Oral History with Nicole Garcia." Telephone interview. 19 July 2016.

<sup>9</sup> Tanis, Justin. "Oral History with Justin Tanis." Telephone interview. 4 August 2016.

as if they are inherently at odds. The discussion also helps restore historically poor relationships between Christianity and LGBTQ people. This type of rhetoric is important because it recognizes how many Christian churches have done real damage to LGBTQ people. However, the sole use of reconciliation rhetoric ignores the fact that a transgender person could feel an inherent draw to the Christian faith and a direct connection between God and their gender.

## II. Time & Generation

Another theme I found related to timelines and the generation of each participant. This is to say that the time period that each participant grew up during greatly influenced their interactions with their gender identity. Timelines also were relevant in relation to what denominations participants chose to be ordained in or were able to be ordained in. I discussed childhood with each of the participants and there were similar stories from those who were designated female at birth about early conceptions of gender. Justin Tanis recalled being raised during the beginning to middle of the second-wave feminist movement. He stated that growing up in a liberal family and in the midst of second-wave feminism actually made it hard for him to confront his gender identity. Tanis stated:

“And um, though I didn’t quite know how to name it and I’m afraid that having um, that kind of progressive environment, that I just came to assume that, you know, my dad taught at Bryn Mawr college, a women’s college, and you know I thought the problem was just that I internalized so much, um, sexism in our society that I, uh, think I want to be a boy.”<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Tanis, Justin. “Oral History with Justin Tanis.” Telephone interview. 4 August 2016.

This shows that Tanis's family culture was liberal-intellectual and that he grew up knowing about feminist ideologies. Ironically, having a liberal-feminist household made transgender issues more confusing for Tanis. Rev. Tanis also discussed how he thought that "being a better feminist" would solve his early issues with his assigned gender. In other words, he thought that he wanted to be a boy due to the patriarchy's dominance and that in order to stop thinking about his gender identity, he would just need to learn how to be a strong woman.

Another participant commented on feminist ideology shaping his early understanding of gender. Jay Wilson was born in the late 70's and grew up during the tail end of the second-wave. Wilson said that he "conceptually wondered if [he would] turn into a boy at some point." He discussed being taught that he could be any kind of girl he wanted to be and do anything that men could do. However, he was still taught that girls remain girls and that girls eventually become women. Wilson added that this allowed him to play with his gender expression as a child but made understanding his gender identity harder. He stated that "I thought my only option was to identify as a masculine woman." Wilson continued to express masculinely and did not find clarity on his gender identity until his time in seminary.<sup>11</sup>

Time also affected ordination processes and decision for various participants. Tanis recalled why he decided to become ordained in the Metropolitan Community Church rather than his home Presbyterian Church or the United Church of Christ. Tanis stated that "basically you have to figure out if your calling is to minister to people or to fight the denominations for the right to do that." He went on to explain that an openly transgender person could be ordained but could not find a job or be hired. He recalled that in the late eighties and early nineties, "the two

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<sup>11</sup> Wilson, Jay. "Oral History with Jay Wilson." Telephone interview. 25 June 2016.

were mutually exclusive” (Tanis 2016). For Tanis, the Metropolitan Community Church was one of the only viable options for ordination and ministering without having to fight or appeal for the right to participate in the ordination process. However, Lawrence Richardson is younger and was not ordained until the early 2000’s. Richardson was being ordained after or during the time that many churches were changing their policies and becoming more radically inclusive.

### III. Raised in a Christian Tradition

The third theme that I found is very straight forward. All of my participants were raised in some Christian tradition. In other words, all of them were raised in a tradition that teaches about Jesus Christ as the Lord and Savior and generally uses some Biblical text. One participant was raised Roman Catholic and the rest were raised in Protestant denominations (Evangelical and Mainline). I primarily bring up this theme in order to give more context to the demographic of people that I interviewed. I think that it is incredibly important to state that these are people who grew up in traditions that fell into a Christian context. The stories and motivations for ordination and faith would likely differ if I had a large population of participants who had converted from other faith traditions.

### IV. Where is the Call?

The final similarity that I found across participants is that most of them perceive job access as the present challenge facing transgender clergy. Asher O’Callaghan touched on this issue when discussing the ELCA’s call system. O’Callaghan explained that “often times it’s not so much discrimination we come up against in the official system so much as it is a difficulty

finding calls.”<sup>12</sup> In other words, he has found that many transgender (as well as lesbian, gay bisexual) people are unable to find congregations that are willing to hire them as pastors for their communities. Jay Wilson also expressed having issues finding a call to a full-time position as a minister and ultimately ended up in disability advocacy work at the University of Minnesota. This also relates back to what Rev. Tanis conveyed when speaking about why he chose the Metropolitan Community Church, rather than any other denomination. Tanis had conveyed that he chose the MCC so that he would not have to worry about the ability to minister to people. I think it is important to recognize the disconnect between the denominational ability to become ordained and the discrimination at the congregational level. Essentially, denominations are recognizing that transgender people can devote themselves to their faith and to a life of ministering to others, however, some churches are not interested in having openly transgender people minister to them.

### Conclusion

In the American imagination of religion, Christianity and LGBT identities are posed as inherent enemies. However, it is inevitable that the two identities intersect inside of the whole identities of people across the United States. I was fortunate enough to speak with nine devoted ordained (or soon to be ordained) individuals who also identify as transgender. Through all of the conversations that I was able to have, I found that each participant viewed their gender identity as part of their Christian faith, that generation and time played a role in conceptions of gender and in the ordination process, and that each participant was raised in a Christian background. Finally, I found that the present challenge for transgender clergy is finding jobs in their

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<sup>12</sup> O’Callaghan, Asher. “Oral History with Asher O’Callaghan.” Telephone interview. 25 July 2016.

denomination. These stories and shared experiences are incredibly important to document because popular conversations about transgender identity are leaving out the incredibly rich intersection of faith and gender. Recording these stories and making them accessible is a crucial part of increasing the visibility of transgender people as well as expanding the definition of what being transgender looks and feels like.